

Rafes Martin is a forty-six year old white farmer in Southwest Georgia, a World War II veteran of Anzio, Solerno and Omaha Beach. In 1945, shortly before his discharge, Martin heard a lecture on "good citizenship" and the importance of voting at an army separation center. Remembering that lecture, Rafes Martin tried to register to vote soon after he came home as a civilian. "Things aren't as different around here as you think, boy," the registrar told him. "So long as I'm in charge the books are closed to colored." Seventeen years later the registrar is still in office. In 1962 Rafes Martin, a Negro, is bitter, and apathetic about voting.

Mrs. Charlotte Henson has been teaching second grade at L.C. Clark Elementary School in Central Alabama since her graduation from college in 1958. Two and a half years ago Mrs. Henson and four of the other teachers at her school talked about voting in the local election for Sheriff, and went to the courthouse one afternoon to see about getting their names put on the polls. The registrar said that he was busy that day, but that the five should come back. The following week two of the teachers lost their jobs. Mrs. Henson, a Negro, got scared; today, she insists unceasingly, she could not be less interested in voting.

The Reverend William McChesney Caster is a New

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Yorker who took a Baptist pastorate in a small western Louisiana town after completing course requirements towards his Ph.D. at New York University. Shocked by the lack of sewerage facilities and the non-existence of police protection in the colored section of town, Mr. Carter urged his flock to seek relief at the polls. The minister set an example in 1957 by attempting to register. Word soon got out that he had flunked the registration test. Mr. Carter, recalling that he could not interpret a section of the state constitution having to do with legislative power to provide for ground rental or gross leases of sixteenth sections of land, shifts embarrassedly when asked about his registration experience. And familiar with the details of their learned minister's attempt, none of the members of the congregation, like Mr. Martin, all Negroes, has in the past four years ever even considered attempting to register to vote.

When Warren Ford graduated as valedictorian from Williston High School in southwest Mississippi three years ago he was awarded a scholarship to a Negro college in Nashville. Home on vacation last summer, and fired by a student led registration drive, young Ford instructed local Negroes in how to fill out the voting form, and encouraged them to apply for registration. One August night Warren Ford was beaten up. In the past six months

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not a single Negro within one hundred miles of Ford's home has attempted to register.

As a trial lawyer in the voting section of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, whose chief base of operation is the deep South, these are the kinds of situations that I think of whenever "Negro apathy" is cited as the real reason for the disparity between the races in the number of registered voters below the Mason-Dixon line. While the names and places in these incidents are fictional, the facts are not. Far more often than not it is the fear, frustration and humiliation stemming from such experiences, rather than the myth of Negro "indifference," or contentment with existing conditions, that explains the absence of any strong local voting movement in many disenfranchised colored communities in the South.

True enough, until quite recent times relatively few Negroes have attempted to defy white political hegemony by seeking to register to vote. The number of those trying to vote has been kept small not by lack of interest among other Negroes, but by the consistency with which those who do try fall, and by the means with which they are rebuffed. The wonder is that despite the monolithic wall of white supremacy in many parts of Dixie a strong interest in the ballot as a primary means of self-improvement has persisted among the average Southern Negro.

The ebb in recent years of physical reprisal as the consequence of bucking the system -- lynchings and beatings are anything but commonplace today -- has created the impression outside the colored community in the South that the risks of defiance have diminished. Nothing could be further from the truth. Violence is only the most dramatic of the means that have long been used in some areas to intimidate Negroes who seek their rights as citizens. The uncomfortable glare of national publicity attending the slaying of an Emmett Till or a Mack Charles Parker has evoked greater reliance on far more refined instruments of control. Economic coercion, for one illustration, is an especially effective means for disciplining those who step out of line, and for making an example of them. Boycotts were not invented by freedom riders. In an economy where Negroes depend heavily on whites for jobs, blackballing has worked disaster on more than one Negro laborer. Farmers who a few days or weeks earlier attempted to register to vote have sometimes found that there were no funds available at the local bank to finance their next crop. And school teachers -- the most respected, educated and aware group in any Negro community -- have been particularly vulnerable, as public employees, to this form of pressure; the occasional firing of a teacher who has tried to register has often been sufficient to subdue this potential source of responsible leadership.

An individual's normal aversion to humiliation is another deterrent whose impact has not been lost on the Southern voting registrar who is bent on keeping the polls lilly white. Not only is a Negro who, after being examined on the duties of citizenship, is told by an election official that he is too stupid to vote unlikely to laugh the experience off; but the friends, neighbors and relatives who one way or another hear the tale will probably be dissuaded from risking the indignity that seems to be the consequence of attempting to register.

In a society where discrimination is the rule not many such incidents are needed in any one locale to keep the average Negro in line. What to an outsider might seem like only a slight rebuff is often sufficient to reinforce or confirm a sense of utter futility in one whose entire life experience has been a series of degrading social and political frustrations. Moreover, not only is every individual barrier obstructing the ultimate goal of full citizenship formidable, but the sheer number of these barriers is calculated to create among those who would challenge the system a mood of utter despair. While the pattern varies widely in the South, a lawsuit recently filed by the Department of Justice illustrates the not uncommon extreme. In one rural county Negroes have not only been traditionally prohibited from voting or from registering, but have also not even been per-

afforded to pay the poll tax that is imposed by the state are prerequisite to casting a ballot.

Despite all of these factors, however, "Negro apathy," in the usually understood sense of indifference or lack of concern is a very secondary aspect of the current effort to secure the franchise for Southern Negroes on an equal basis with whites. The truth of the matter is that the recent focusing of national attention, through Governmental and private action, on glaring voting inequities from Georgia to Mississippi and beyond, has to a far greater extent than is generally recognized exposed a repressed eagerness among Negroes to participate in public affairs. The mask of obediience which the Southern white community has for so long compelled from the Negroes it dominates often conceals a deep seated desire for political equality that should be no more surprising in Clark County, Mississippi than in the Congo.

Private organizations whose primary aim is to stimulate Negro registration have discovered that, by and large, generating an interest in voting is only a peripheral problem; their major effort is simply to persuade Southern Negroes to translate that interest into action -- to convince them that trying to register may no longer be a futile gesture, and that anyway nothing is accomplished if they do not at least make the attempt to qualify as voters. Similarly, the ex-

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perience of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division -- which concerns itself exclusively with actual and potential violations of federal law, and has no connection with efforts to drum up voter activity among Negroes -- teaches that the number of qualified Negroes who have actually applied for registration is generally an inadequate reflection of the extent of the interest in the colored community in securing the franchise. For example, in those instances where the Government has carefully supervised a court decree outlawing voter discrimination in a particular county, there has been a spectacular increase in the number of Negroes who of their own accord have sought to register to vote.

The refusal or inability of the white Southerner to grasp that "outsiders" like the Federal Government have not created the Negroes' desire to vote, but are simply reacting to it, explains the militant resistance of many who are well intentioned and basically law abiding. Ironically, in most towns and counties in Dixie suppression of even the slightest interest in politics by Negroes has succeeded so well over the years that a large part of their white population has come to believe sincerely that local Negroes could not care less about voting. Hence, to many whites talk about "rights" and "law" is irrelevant; for what they think they see is a deliberate instigation from without that by reason of some diabolical motivation is turning apparent harmony into ob-

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vious disorder. It is this supposed meddling maliceousness that for many justifies holding firm, whatever the cost.

Similarly, only vaguely understanding why Southern Negroes have in the past not been more insistent about being treated as citizens, many Northern whites have suspicions of their own about the genuineness of the yearnings for equality that are today widely attributed to the colored man in Dixie. Quaints about imagined "external exploitation" are not limited to the South alone.

What in fact "outsiders" have provided for the underprivileged Southern Negro is not the desire for improvement or equality, but rather the encouragement, the wherewithal and the organization for translating that desire into reality. The activities of private organizations along the broad spectrum of civil rights offers tangible evidence that change is possible. The obvious sincerity with which the Federal Government is seeking to vindicate the law promises that change is inevitable. As the sense of isolation and hopelessness gradually dissolves, the indigenous political consciousness in many colored communities in the South is becoming increasingly apparent.

Even today a sympathetic visitor grows accustomed to the thoroughly American refrain, echoed with an intensity that might have startled Patrick Henry's "We pay taxes, don't

"why shouldn't we vote?" And like the Founding Fathers themselves, many Southern Negroes have long sensed that full citizenship will bring with it both a personal dignity that arises from equality and a fair share of the material advantages that government provides. Interestingly, the Albany Movements springing up all over the South generally demand not only equal economic opportunity, but also that colored customers be given the same courtesy and consideration traditionally reserved for whites.

The conviction that the ballot is a principal instrument for the attainment of goals such as these has not been formulated in the abstract. One need wallow but once in the unsavory mud of nearly any Southern town's Negro section to understand why voting seems important to a colored citizen who dashes home after leaving his job in a well-saved white neighborhood. The stench following Spring rains gives a vivid, and almost constant, reminder of the blessings of proper sewage. A prosperous Negro businessman whom I was questioning one time as a potential witness in a Government lawsuit made the point best. He suddenly pointed bitterly out the window at a shabby dog slinking along the sun-parched dirt road. "To the Sheriff and the gang up at City Hall," he said, "I'm no better than that dog. I don't vote; they don't need me to get elected. And the consideration I get shows it."

Moreover, the mass media have had the expected impact

In accelerating the Southern Negroes' desire for political equality and the ballot. The modern world, with its sophistication and its impatience, has fortified him no less than the rest of the population with ideals and experiences that transcend the familiar. It has, for one illustration particularly close to home, brought almost daily contact with other, progressive Southern communities. And the lesson of Atlanta and Memphis has not been lost on the rural Negro population. A substantial colored vote in those cities, constituting the language best understood by politicians, has brought with it a greater equalization of public services. Moreover, the political climate has evoked responsible white leadership to which, year after year, the electorate seems overwhelmingly to respond. And relationships between the races in those cities are a model for the South.

To be sure, just as everywhere there are people who, for all kinds of reasons wish that the world would go away and leave them alone, each Negro community has an element that is thoroughly detached from the mainstream of activity and vital interest in winning the right to vote. On the other hand, as in other civil rights matters, it is ironical that adamant white resistance to the demands of colored citizens for the ballot is swelling the ranks of Negro activists at an increasing rate, particularly among the young. Like its counterpart in most communities, a substantial proportion of

the Southern Negro population would not ordinarily feel impelled to play more than a marginal role in political affairs. Under the impact of current pressures, however, more and more Negroes are developing a political awareness that is not only valuable now in the group effort to win the vote, but that is likely to persist once the struggle has been won. Through their foolish and doomed defiance of Federal law militant segregationists are enhancing the actual and potential strength of the group whose inferior status they seek to perpetuate.

In the final analysis, of course, the intensity of public or private efforts to eliminate racial impediments to full citizenship cannot, should not and need not depend on the number of Negroes who are committed to achieving the equality which is their constitutional right. So long as one citizen is deprived of his inalienable heritage as an American, the integrity of our democracy is to that extent undermined. The compromising of even one man's rights is the shame of us all.

HARPER'S MAGAZINE
Editorial Room

HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS



40 EAST 33RD STREET
NEW YORK 16, N.Y.
MURRAY HILL 5-0800

March 7, 1962

Dear Mr. Marshall:

At the suggestion of Mr. Louis Lomax, I am sending you a typescript of his article scheduled for the May issue of Harper's. We should be most grateful if you would read it, or have it read, and let us know if you find any errors of fact. Since we will be going to press within a few days, it would be helpful to have your suggestions as soon as is convenient.

Sincerely,

Catharine Meyer

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Enc.

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